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ABSTRACT

The results of centralization of one of the larger "small-rural" school districts in New York State are examined in this case study. The demographics of Yorkville and the feelings and opinions that residents have about their communities and schools are discussed first. Next, the history of the school system since 1950, when the district was created as the result of a reorganization referendum, is surveyed. In this context, sections are included on centralization (involving 50 former districts), the post-centralization period (during which there was widespread dissatisfaction with the schools), the school board's decision to close two elementary schools in outlying communities and the effect that the closings had on those two communities, and today's scenario which indicates that parents are generally pleased to have their children in the district and that Yorkville compares favorably with other districts its size as concerns breadth of curriculum, activities, and standardized test scores. Finally, several attributes of the school system bearing on an assessment of the quality of education available in the district are discussed. These include: general attitudes, the special education program, academic courses offered, and the interactive telecommunications project. Quotes from residents, school board members, teachers, and students are included. (JMM)

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by
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Organizational Alternatives for Small-Rural Schools In New York State*

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Introduction

The following case study deals with one of the larger "small-rural" school districts in New York State. The study first discusses the local demographics and the feelings and opinions residents have about their communities and the schools. Next, it surveys the history of the school system since 1950, when the district was created as the result of a reorganization referendum. Finally, it discusses several attributes of the school system that bear on an assessment of the quality of education available in the district.

The information for this case study was compiled from taped interviews, questionnaires, and public documents. Parents, students, teachers, secretaries, administrators, School Board members, and other community residents were very friendly, helpful, and forthright.

The School District and Community

District Characteristics

"Yorkville" is a relatively large rural school district, both in geography, at well over 300 square miles, and in population, with over 2000 students and 100 teachers housed in four buildings. The village of Yorkville has a population of 4,000 to 4,500, and the surrounding township has a population of about 7,000. But the school district boundaries extend well

beyond those of the township. It is so large geographically that it encompasses all or parts of eight other townships that send some or all of their children to the Yorkville schools.

The largest school building houses the junior and senior high schools, the sixth grade, and the district offices. This is in the heart of the village, half a mile from main street, the town clerk, the bandstand, the library, and the new McDonald's. There are three elementary schools. The two larger ones, Hillside and Riverbank, are at opposite ends of town, just within the village boundaries. Prescott, the third elementary school, is half the size of the other two. It lies in the town of Prescott, about seven miles away.

Yorkville spent $3,900 per pupil in 1983, putting it in the second highest quartile in the state, but it is not a wealthy district by any means. The district is in the lowest quartile among the state in both property wealth and income (per pupil).

Village residents traditionally distinguish between Riverbankers and Hillsiders. For some, Riverbank is the upscale part of town, but differences are marginal at best. Only 11% of Yorkville families are mid- to upper-middle class in income; less than 10% of the residents are college graduates. And they are both scattered throughout the Village and the District. The "upper class" in Yorkville is really the middle class, and no place appeared to be more (or less) upscale than any other. There are disparaging words in reference to welfare recipients and the unemployed, but we formed the impression that people are

looking for ways to distinguish themselves. Very often people tend to distinguish between their group and others, with little reason other than familiarity. This is no hard evidence for these observations to cite, but we noticed throughout this case study that people measure themselves against the most similar groups, without apparently noting their place on an absolute scale. The people of Yorkville look to Livingston for city amenities, but feel superior to Jones Forks. The people of Livingston are envious of Buffalo, Syracuse, and Albany; and they look down on Yorkville, and do not even notice Jones Forks.

More than a third of the district residents who have work are in blue collar occupations; but unemployment is quite high -- even for an area hit hard by the slump in the farm economy -- at over 25%, and most of it is long-term. There are several different industries nearby. Little of the local industry is in the town, however; less than two-thirds of town residents actually work in the town. According to a long term resident: "There's no industry of much size; we're sort of a shopping center, we're a big territory."

Ten percent are employed in agriculture. The town was once a farming hub for the state, but since has declined in importance. The low income levels -- 45% of the households earned less than $10,000 in 1979, and 18% were below poverty level -- are probably due in large part to farm failures and low farm income, and the consequences of these for other businesses -- e.g. banking, suppliers, auto dealers -- that rely on the

farmer's patronage. However, the village remains a center for county farming business and activities, and is the site of the county fair, which generates a lot of excitement, community feeling, and tourism. Attendance approaches 60,000 over the course of the week, not including 1200 4-H kids, as well as 327 head of cattle, 257 horses, and hundreds of sheep and goats.

The fair seems to help compensate for the lack of Yorkville's economic vitality, but still the area, as a whole, is not experiencing great prosperity. The town of Prescott is "the only real growth community in our district. It is probably the only town where you will see new housing starts." There are some bad feelings regarding economic disparities between the several Towns in the district. Some residents attribute the housing construction in Prescott to the "lower tax rates" there: they believe that because of the large industrial base and the resultant high property wealth, Prescott homeowners have lower taxes. This has put some fuel on smoldering fires:

> Our school tax per thousand [dollars assessed value] is $167, and the rate in Prescott was $28, and yet it's all the same school district. And then they close our school. That didn't set too well.

An ex-mayor shares this view:

> I think probably why we don't have more businesses or large businesses moving into the Village is probably because of our tax structure. We are very unequalized. [A large factory] picks up most of the taxes at Prescott.

Whether or not the neighborhoods that make up the Yorkville school district are well-defined, the drawing areas for the three

elementary buildings fluctuate from year to year. Which building any student attends depends on the location of the home, of course. But the district tries to "maintain class balance" between the buildings, and will bus for a few extra miles some students who live in the "grey areas" -- areas approximately equidistant between two schools -- in order to keep class sizes within a certain range. Once a student begins attending a particular elementary building, they will not be transferred if they wish to continue there, and siblings will not be spread between different elementary buildings. Tansfers do not pose academic problems (assuming they do not occur during the school year) because all reading, math, and subject-area programs are district-wide. The other principle is that if there is a choice of buildings, older residents have priority before newcomers. While the system may seem quite autocratic and open to arbitrariness, there is no evidence that it leads to hard feelings.

One result of having a very large area from which to draw students is that there are also great distances to cover to get many of them to and from school. Transportation costs are expected to run over $900,000 this year; most of this is paid by the State. It comes to over $400 per student, except that about half the students are not bused. Bus rides can be up to 65 minutes each way. At the high school level, about 10% ride for more than 45 minutes each way. That figure ignores the seniors, many of whom drive themselves or carpool to school.

In addition to the regular morning and afternoon runs, the district runs buses at 3:45pm, 5:00pm, and 7:00pm every day. The 7:00pm bus --the "late bus" -- runs mainly in the winter, when indoor athletic facilities are very heavily used. The 5:00 and 7:00 buses were added after parents complained that their children could not participate in athletics because they lived twenty miles away and had no one to drive them. Of course, non-athletes ride these buses, too, after detention, after-school conferences, cheerleading practice, etc. Nevertheless, the later runs are sparsely populated. And per-student costs are even higher than might appear, because while the morning and the 2:30pm buses are subsidized by the State at 90% of approved expenses, the costs of the later buses are solely the district's responsibility.

Yorkville has a weekly newspaper, and a daily column in the Livingston Daily. Livingston (pop. over 30,000) is the nearest city, 35 miles away. They say there is "heavy traffic" on the road from Yorkville to Livingston on weekend evenings in the summer, with all the people driving there for entertainment and shopping. On the other hand, the trading population of Yorkville itself is close to 35,000; people come in from the small towns for about a twenty mile radius. Yorkville has one movie theater and one bowling alley. The lodges and church groups sponsor activities on weekends -- pot lucks, bingo, etc. -- and there is a high school athletic event almost every night. For anything else, many people go to Livingston or to one of two nearby towns

housing state colleges, each less than an hour's drive, for music or theater.

The Village of Yorkville has one Catholic and nine Protestant churches, including four varieties of Methodism. The nearest synagogue is about 25 miles, and one has to drive for well over an hour to see a black person. One Jewish parent stated that many sixth graders do not know what 'Jewish' means until they meet her kids in junior high. The entire school system enrolls four black people and seven Asians: they comprise 1/2% of the total enrollment.

Also in town are two fraternal lodges, an American Legion, and a VFW hall. Except for the bowling leagues, the activities people regularly engage in seem to center around the churches, the school, and these kinds of institutions. There is an active Grange and a Chamber of Commerce, and Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary Clubs. The fire department sponsors a lot of activities. These groups do support the school. The Rotarians sponsor a speaking contest and the Honor Society banquet; other groups give scholarships. According to one parent: "The school is a thing that they would think of first to help." One resident attributed some of this to self-interest, however:

> They like to be able to use the schools for activities. That's a factor; they hate to have the school go on [an] austerity [budget] because that means they have to pay to use the rooms.

For kids, besides the school and all its activities, there are scouting groups, church groups, a 4-H, and FFA. As most

people tell it, there is not much in the area to hold "young people", meaning people aged about 13 to 30. A senior says: "It is a good town to grow up in, and to raise kids, but for young people just getting out of college I don't think that it is a good place to come back to." A mother of eight tells us:

> As far as I'm concerned they have absolutely nothing for children to do in this town. They do have [outdoor] skating rinks, one on each side of the river. The only thing that our kids really have is the bowling alley.

For another senior:

> There really isn't anything to do. Sometimes we go to [the State College], because a large number from my class, the people I hung around with went to State. I wish the school would do a lot more. I have talked to other kids from other schools, and their schools sponsor lots of things... like homecoming in the fall, and like a bonfire and a dance.

Instead of homecoming they have a "Spirit Week", with a different activity each day, e.g. dress-up day, hat day, pep rally, pie-in-the-face contest.

As for school activities and clubs, one student told us: "There aren't any... I think that the reason that they don't have some of these is the kids don't want it either." However there is a chess club, a forensics society, an art club, a computer club, a foreign language club, a library club... We counted twenty-eight sponsored clubs and activities in the latest budget, not including athletics and junior high groups; but there are additional clubs and activities, such as the science fair, Student Government Day and Spirit Week, Pep Band, and Chefs Club. One of the guidance counselors told us:

> I'll tell you, there's an athletic event or something going on every evening. It took me three weeks until I could find an open night to hold a financial aid information meeting for parents.

But when it comes to extra-curricular activities, the real emphasis is on athletics. When people in the community are asked about supporting the school, the first thing they think of is attendance at football and basketball games. There are more than twenty interscholastic teams. But a couple of years ago when a student wanted to start the Forensics Society, "it was hard at first to get money for it," even with an avid faculty sponsor.

Lack of "thi gs to do" in the community can make it difficult to hire people for the school. Marge Sommerfeld, a district administrator, thinks people need to be "lured" into the district:

> I'm thinking of special area people like psychologists, special ed. people. I have had a position of school psychologist open that the district will support. I haven't been able to fill it. We also have a problem getting certified substitutes... People who are just starting in a career, sometimes when we lure them into this county, unless they are from the area a lot of them tend not to stay here after a period of time. You either would enjoy the geographical location, what the area has to offer -- it definitely has some things to offer -- but if you are used to a metropolitan area you are going to find it to be an adjustment. Some people aren't used to traveling an hour or two to participate in those metropolitan kinds of activities.

But additionally, it may be hard to attract specially skilled people because the salaries are not especially high. The

Superintendent understands that "there is not a large pay difference between teachers and administrators in the area." On the other hand, at least one parent believes many teachers are "coming in to get the high wages that Yorkville has."

Yorkville is still in many ways a small community. A high school senior told us:

> Most people know each other, so when somebody new comes in they are pretty much treated well, and they are invited in and everyone talks to them and knows them. I guess that it is just so small... I can't say that it is a family, but it is pretty much like everyone knows about you.

Sommerfeld said:

> There is a real family focus in this community... There are problems in the community, social problems. However, there's a security here that I for one, being the mother of a twelve-year-old, when I think about moving to other communities I know I would not have the same trusting feeling of my twelve-year-old walking around other communities that I basically feel here.
>
> Every once in a while we are exposed to a murder, kidnapping, things like this. But it's not, like... you only get one of those maybe every five or ten years.

The Yorkville correspondent to the Livingston News said that, for the most part, Yorkville is still so small as to be "very boring. As I said, it's a good town. There's no culture. Our movie theater closes for the month of February." The biggest controversy to hit Yorkville recently was last year when:

> somebody wanted to open an adult bookstore, so everybody got up in arms -- we have a lot of little fringe evangelical groups, and they seem to proliferate. The village first proposed a local law prohibiting any X-rated

> business, then realized they couldn't do that, so now they're proposing regulating by zoning.

In accord with employment and income conditions, the education level of the district is low by State standards. Of persons over eighteen, less than 65% are high school graduates. The number of Yorkville H.S. graduates who go on to college is less than 50%, and they tend not to settle in the district after graduation. And one parent told us: "As far as education goes, it's a poor county. I'm talking, we've got a lot right here that don't know how to read and write." She continued:

> [But] I think people are becoming more aware of, 'Hey! This kid ought to get educated.' I think it's because it's easier for a kid to get to and from school now, and I think that the curriculum is another thing, and what I think has helped this school system as much as anything is the BOCES. It's keeping kids in school. I know of two boys right from Filbey that would have never, never graduated from school had it not been for BOCES. They couldn't have handled going to this school all day long, and sat in a classroom, you know. With our girls, we've insisted that every one of them take a BOCES program.

One of her daughters got married right out of high school, two have gotten jobs doing what they studied at BOCES -- secretarial, and sales -- and one studied cosmetology, did not like it, and worked as a secretary before joining the Navy, where her mother says she does not belong. In her mother's words, "she's really into helping other people." The life of this young person gives support to one student's impression that:

> A lot of [High School students] really have no foresight as to what they want to do. Whereas, if you ask a kid who's planning on

> college, they have definite ideas, they've thought about it.

The School System

Yorkville has several administrators. In addition to the School Superintendent there is an Assistant Superintendent. The High School Principal has two Assistant Principals. There is a Director of Elementary Ed. (DEE) who supervises the three elementary Building Principals. There is also a full-time Director of Athletics.

Bill Carson, one of the building level administrators, thinks this give him better control:

> We can walk through our halls and visit with our kids and find that they are a group of kids... I do have somebody that is continually watch-dogging the kids.

And here is the Superintendent's assessment of Carson:

> He is excellent. His prime concerns have been keeping the school safe and organized, maintaining an orderly educational climate. As far as I'm concerned, if you come in at the other end of the building, and the kids are polite and help you find your way down here, then he's doing his job.

At the High School level, most of the actual course design and implementation, program monitoring, and follow-up is delegated to the department heads. The department heads are H.S. teachers, but they supervise the curricula in their departments all the way down to first grade. According to Carson:

> It is my role to be the innovator in identifying a particular course need, gathering the information that is needed, working with the dept. heads to insure that we have the facilities and supplies.

> Basically, I say 'Here is the course and I will support it. You implement it, you watch it, and you tell me what we are doing right and wrong.'

He says this unabashedly.

> To be perfectly honest with you, they can do the job better than I can, they are the experts in the areas. I mean, I don't have a real extensive background in, say, science.

But at the Elementary level, it is done differently. Marge Sommerfeld engages in regular systematic overview of each curricular area, but changes are also considered when someone makes a particular suggestion or points out a problem. When a program area comes under investigation, a district steering committee is established. As of now there are three; a language steering committee, an elementary science steering committee, and a child abuse education steering committee. There will also be either grade-level meetings or meetings with representatives from each of the three buildings. (The fourth grade teachers have been meeting for one-and-a-half years to set up a local history program, which is to be coordinated with the local historical society.) And remember that since the high school Department Heads are really K-12 Department Heads, it is possible to ensure longitudinal coordination as well.

There has almost always been a Director of Elementary Education (DEE) since centralization, although it has sometimes been called Asst. Superintendent, sometimes Coordinator of Curriculum. The DEE also has responsibility for the Federal programs, such as Chapter I funding (for remedial services) and

is Chair of the Committee on the Handicapped (COH). The position was eliminated during one of the shake-ups in 1976 so as a result, two principals each were given two schools to cover, while the other was given charge of one elementary building, the COH, and the Federal programs. At present, in addition to the other duties, the DEE has taken on further responsibilities for supervision of principals and teachers, including planning for in-service programs; and State and Federally mandated testing; and is also somewhat involved in bargaining and appropriations deliberations.

Having a Director of Elementary Education in addition to three Building Principals also means there is always someone available to go to conferences and seminars and keep up with new ideas for improvement, especially in staff development. As one administrator put it:

> I think there's a real openness to looking for ways to improve education here. I think we have some excellent teachers and some assertive administrators too, who will vote for things.

History of the District

Centralization

Both the Town and the Village population were in decline from the earliest part of the century until the mid 1930's. Even while the population was declining, there were complaints of overcrowding in the village school, and in 1936 an annex was built onto the High School building, funded in part by

Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration. In the late 1930's and on through the 1950's the population was again on the rise. From 1940 to 1950, the Town and the Village population each increased by roughly 10%, reaching 6,500 and 4,900, respectively. But after the war, the push for centralization grew. The first centralization vote, in 1949, saw the proposal defeated by fewer than 100 votes, but one year later the measure passed by more than 2:1.

The newly centralized district was comprised of fifty former districts, each with its own 1, 2, or 3 room school. Abe Skimmerhorn was hired as Director of Elementary Education the year the consolidation went into effect:

> I spent my first year lost half the time throughout the countryside finding these rural schools. They gradually closed. They were in operation roughly 6-8 years after the centralization and then we tried to close them as fast as the population went down. It was all part of the original plan for centralization.

Contrary to Skimmerhorn's impressions, however, the population was on the rise from 1950-60, although it was not growing as fast as it did in the 1930's and 40's; growth was less than 4% in the 1950's.

Five years after the centralization, a bond issue was passed to finance the building of five new elementary buildings. Most of the previously existing schools were closed when the new buildings were built in 1955-6. In addition to the already existing high school building, two of the elementary buildings, Riverbank and Hillside, were to be in the village proper. Those

two were built from identical plans, each with about sixteen classrooms plus other facilities. The other three elementary buildings were to be located in outlying communities; Prescott, Wheeler, and Filbey. These were identical to each other as well, but much smaller than the other two with only about half a dozen classrooms, and smaller cafeterias, auditoriums, etc. The Riverbank and Hillside buildings were built with the idea of expansion in the future, because of the expected population shift towards the more "urban" areas. The reverse turned out to be the case.

As Skimmerhorn recalls:

> It took a lot of work [to get the new construction approved.] It wasn't a big vote in favor of it, but it was in favor. People had been promised that their taxes were going to go down. Well, this never happens. They didn't go down because the building costs were passed on to them, of course. But with the closing of the [old one-three room] schools, there wasn't really that much difference [in tax rates before and after centralization.]

The Post-Centralization Period

Five years after the schools were built, the superintendent retired and Skimmerhorn assumed the post. A long-time resident said that things were "peaceful and cozy" during his tenure. Budgets were not rejected, the teachers did not strike; teachers, parents, and administration were on good terms. Skimmerhorn himself reached retirement in 1972 without much excitement. Dave Fitch was promoted at that time from Junior High Principal to Superintendent. As a current administrator recalls:

> Fitch was a good curriculum person, very nice, very conservative. But he had come up through the ranks here, and things were too inbred, too cozy; it was hard to get anything done.

Most people associated with the district at the time agree:

> One good thing about being a bus driver for this district is that the school system -- the administration, the principals -- sticks up for their bus drivers. I have been here fourteen years, and for my first three, four years [i.e., the years of Fitch's tenure] nobody would back nobody. I mean, you just wrote a referral [a complaint against a student] and you were lucky if you even got a response to it.

Fitch faced other problems as well. The early 1970's were a time of very high inflation, and the whole country seemed in an economic turmoil. The teachers won many concessions in the contract negotiations--including extended sabbatic privileges, stronger seniority projections, salary increases, and bonuses for graduate study--which raised the price of schooling, and made administration and supervision more cumbersome. A taxpayers' association formed in response to what they thought were high taxes in Yorkville, and two of Fitch's budgets were defeated.

Fitch was not destined to last very long. Although Skimmerhorn's tenure as Superintendent had appeared uneventful, there seems to have been some dry rot beneath the surface. Fitch faced difficult circumstances, but it is not clear how much he was responsible for them. Joe Marino, the current School Board president, was a Board member at the time Fitch was Superintendent:

> We had one [other] Board member, one from the taxpayers' group, who was a real vicious person, who was very miserable and very active, and I think he speeded the resignation of [Fitch]. It was kind of a bad time to be an administrator.

Apparently they had the wrong man for the time. The Board president at the time talked Fitch into staying on an extra year, even though he had resigned and was "not a good administrator, but he was a good fellow;" he needed that last year to qualify for his 20 year retirement. (He was the local Superintendent for five years.)

There was widespread dissatisfaction with the State of the schools. People felt that taxes were high, there were some bad teachers, the community was dissatisfied, there was a lot of waste in the budget, and the administration was unresponsive and it was hard to get anything done. In looking for Fitch's replacement the School Board was looking for someone who could make some drastic changes. One perspective on the problem was that Fitch knew everybody so well that he could not discipline them. They looked for someone who would have no personal commitments to anyone, who could do the job he was hired for; and much of it would be unpleasant anyway. A long-time School Board member told us:

> Barnette was brought in from the outside to shake things up. He was very bright, very talented. It was his job to straighten out some of the messes that had been created during the time of Fitch... Prior to coming here he was Dean of Students at a private school, so he had never worked in the public sector and was never faced with unions and things like this.

He seems to have accomplished what he was hired to do, but he posed a substantial threat to district cohesiveness. Barnette declared austerity measures, and eliminated nineteen teaching positions. The teachers' contract went unsigned, and the union declared a strike. When that did not seem to be working, they threatened a boycott of community businesses.

But a taxpayers' association had formed and was now supporting the Board and Barnette, who were trying to cut expenses and keep taxes down. The community was especially angered by the teachers' threat of a boycott of local businesses, and the taxpayers' association had broad support. The support they gave to the Board came not just in the form of words, either. The union president was evicted from her apartment; her landlord was in the taxpayers' association. The local paper, whose editor was also in the taxpayers' association, published the names and salaries of every teacher in the district, which are higher than what most other people in town earn. The teachers resented such moves, but they received little community sympathy or support and could not sustain the strike. In the end, with little hope of changing the Board's opinion, the teachers accepted a zero pay increase, lost substantial sabbatic benefits, and relinquished their right to incremental salary increases for graduate credits. Barnette had finished his work.

After he had done his job, Barnette left. An old friend of his told us that his departure was voluntary. The private school he had attended and once taught at asked him to come back and be

Dean, "and that's the only thing that could have moved him out of here." According to this long term Board member, "[Barnette] cleaned house, and we knew that he probably wouldn't stay; but by the time he left, at the end of his third year, the message had been made. He was even beginning to patch things up, although I don't think he ever could have done it [completely]." It is not obvious to us what that message was, but perhaps it had something to do with the Board's willingness to make the difficult but proper choices.

The newspaper reporter told us:

> I really admired [Barnette], but he made a lot of enemies; because he was very outspoken, a real take-charge guy. He took a stronger stand against the teachers and their union than had been taken in the past, so it was quite an adversarial relationship, and I thought he was super.

School Closings

It was in the midst of Barnette's tenure (1978) and the rest of this turmoil -- the activist taxpayers' association and budget defeats, the turnover and personality conflicts surrounding the superintendent's office, and the acrimony surrounding the teacher contract negotiations -- that the district decided to close two elementary schools in outlying communities that had been built in the mid-1950's, just after the reorganization.

The predictions of population shifts and decline, on which the original reorganization had been predicated, had been only partially correct. By the mid-seventies, the population had begun to decline, and many were led to consider closing the two

least-populated elementary buildings, Wheeler and Filbey. No one could have known at the time that the new population trend was to be population growth in some of the outlying areas combined with population decline in the Village proper.

In their last year of operation, Wheeler had 62 students, and Filbey had 82. Both schools had had combined classes for several years: e.g. all the third and fourth graders in one class. Even at that, according to a long-time veteran Board member, "The [Wheeler and Filbey] schools were being held open by busing kids out of Yorkville [, the Hillside school,] to fill them."

But a parent on the other side of the fence tells a different story:

> It was a gradual process. The first thing was, they said, 'Well, the kids over on the River Road ought not to come to Filbey, let's take them in to Yorkville.' Then it was the kids out in Chester, and it was, 'Well, they're on the bus route anyway, we'll send them into Yorkville.' They started taking the kids out of that [Filbey] school, there must have been sixty to seventy students taken out.

This parent's story fits better with the reality of the local population changes through the 1960's, namely, an 8% drop in Village population, and relative constancy in the outlying areas.

People in both communities were "absolutely outraged" (as one parent put it) when the decision was made to close the schools.

The decision to close schools (i.e. after district centralization,) is by school board vote, not popular vote, and

Filbey had no representative on the board. All nine board members are elected at-large.

> We don't have a lot of people run for the School Board, unfortunately. The reason we went to at-large elections in the first place was that in the past, sometimes there had been two or three people running for one seat, all of whom might have been very good candidates, and on the other hand sometimes we have a not so desirable person running unopposed for a seat; so the feeling was that if we ran at large, then the three best candidates would get the most votes.

This policy may have had other consequences as well. At the time of the centralization there was, according to one Board member, "sort of an understanding"; according to a news reporter, "sort of an unwritten law", that representatives of each community would be selected; "but over the years that has just gone away because people from the different towns haven't run." Someone else told us: "After a while it was hard to get candidates from those places." Stewart Scott, who was president of the Board at the time, told us that he was constantly trying to get somebody from those communities to fill the spots:

> There were a lot of hippies that lived out there [in Wheeler,] people that were back to nature folks, who had moved there specifically because they wanted that little school for their kids, that rural, rural environment.

We did not hear anyone else talk about hippies, nor did we meet any. But it is indubitable that many Wheeler parents desired their cozy little community to remain as it was:

> You know what it's like. We had PTA, and everybody knew everybody else -- the kids all did -- and you hated to lose it. You had

> your little Christmas programs and your little parties all the time, and this was all lost when they went to Yorkville.

Back to Scott:

> And the oldtimers said: 'When we centralized [in 1950] it was because you agreed,' meaning the board of ed. at the time, 'to always keep a school out here in Wheeler, and that's the reason why it's put out here.' Deals were struck during centralization, although nothing was written down... I'm sure the way the thing is that somebody at the time said: 'Well, that school will always be there.' A politician's promise.

Since the school officials who were working out the district reorganization in the late 1940's were not officials of the Yorkville Central School District -- it did not exist yet -- they could not make agreements that could bind the newly created district. Whether the deal makers realized this or not we cannot guess, in part because the centralized district has no records of anything before 1950. But the people who had relied on the promises of those former officials are not consoled by knowing that their hand-shake was not binding.

Scott remembers this way:

> We evaded for a long time whether to close [Filbey and Wheeler] or not, and we never really had... It was a matter of courage. Politically, it was a messy thing to do, and nobody really had the courage. Well, some fellow came through and proposed that we change those buildings to low income housing and apply for federal grants. And quite frankly that was the catalyst that broke the stalemate; we felt that that was something constructive to do with those buildings.

As he continues, the closings came in 1978-79:

> At a time of upheaval in the districts. We had another superintendent come in at the time. We were having a lot of contract problems. We had a lot of problems in the community with lack of confidence in the board, budgets were being defeated, building projects and roofing renovation projects were defeated: a lot of community problems.

The Board knew that the residents of Filbey and Wheeler would not immediately take to the idea of having "their" schools closed. They began shifting meeting sites regularly, and sent representatives -- administrators or Board members -- to the outlying areas to explain why they thought it necessary or desirable to consolidate.

Scott:

> Yes, one of the arguments we were using was that the quality of education could be improved [by closing the two schools.] I don't know if that's a valid argument or not. The primary reason was money... The debate will go on forever whether or not you can do a good job with a one/two or a three/four [combined class, which those small schools had at the time.] That's an academic question. But the dollars and cents of it wasn't: it can be an extremely expensive way to educate kids.

This is partly because of all the facilities, such as the cafeteria and the library, that must be maintained at full cost, even if they are used at only one-third capacity. But some of these problems are easily solved: the nurse can be trained to be a librarian as well (or vice-versa). Instead of running a cafeteria the school can contract with a caterer.

However, certain other costs would still appear to be insurmountable. One difficulty in keeping open these small

schools in geographically large districts is in providing special services, such as music and art teachers, remedial math and reading specialists, a school psychologist. To protect the specialists sanity and to allow for road conditions, the district has to allow for one hour of travel time each way. As it stands now with three elementary schools, scheduling requirements force the music teachers to visit at least two and sometimes all four buildings each day. Having six professional specialists commuting once each day is equivalent to hiring one person full-time just to drive around in their car.

However, Scott is wrong to claim that quality is not an issue. The major expense of elementary education is teacher salaries. The schools could have kept their costs down to a reasonable level and remained open by further combining classes; perhaps Filbey would have become a "two-room schoolhouse", with one K-2 class and one 3-6 class. But the reason this was not proposed is certainly because virtually no one believes that children can receive an adequate education in such circumstances.

At any rate, whether or not it is in the abstract more expensive to educate students in smaller schools, any savings that might have accrued from the school closings were not apparent in the next year's budget. The 78-9 budget came to $6.0 million. The schools were closed prior to the 80-81 school year. The 81-2 budget came to $7.5 million, a 25% increase over the four years (not adjusting for inflation).

> My first year [here as H.S. Principal in 1979, the transition year before the school

> closings] we made cuts. We had some fat in our staff. That was back when all the crunching was going on. It hadn't happened here in Yorkville, so it did happen; not because of my arrival, but because it was the time.

But any cuts that were made were more than compensated for by increases, most notably in transportation costs, up 49%.

The cost argument and the quality argument were the predominant ones for nearly everyone we talked to, but many people were not buying them:

> I really thought that those people down there, a lot of them, would have welcomed the opportunity to be in the Village. I was 100% wrong. And I even felt so confident that I told Mr. Reese [the current Superintendent, who was at the time Director of Elementary Ed.] and Mr. Barnette that I would go down there and break the ice. And I did. Oh! And the bottom caved in.

As one Filbey parent remembers:

> When Abe Skimmerhorn was superintendent he tried to get us to build this big, beautiful new middle school because they had so many kids that they didn't know what to do with, they had meetings upon meetings upon meetings trying to shove a middle school down the taxpayers' throats. And all of a sudden they started talking about closing schools because they didn't have enough kids.

A Wheeler parent tells a similar story.

> At first this five million dollar [middle] school had to be built because there were so many kids, and then all of a sudden there wasn't even enough kids to keep these schools open. So, I think distrust is a strong word, but a lot of it [the ill feeling towards the school board] is along that line.

Scott sees it this way:

> You're dealing with a strange mentality amongst some of the folks, especially in the rural areas... There's an essential distrust in people who are government. They don't care whether it's the President of the United States or the local school board.

For example, we talked with one parent who says:

> I know nothing about building, but I feel they're doing it [i.e., renovating the auditorium] wrong; the pool is supposed to be open to the public, but that is not going to work, it's going to be very expensive.

On the other hand, we have seen why a certain amount of distrust was justifiable. Parents felt that the Board had been sneaky in not making their plans known sooner. Many parents remain convinced that the decision to close the two community schools was made during Skimmerhorn 's tenure, five to ten years before it was announced. They think the Board fudged on the facts, including facts about the population shift. They remember the fiasco of the proposed new middle school just a few years earlier. And they feel their trust was broken, in that they were "promised" their schools would always remain open. Moreover, they seem to have been dealing with people who might not have been overly sensitive to parents' emotional baggage.

Given that the schools had to be closed, was it a good thing? As far as integrating people of varied backgrounds goes, school consolidation in Yorkville appears to have had mixed effects, depending on whether one looks at the immediate or the long term consequences, and on who one talks to. One teacher observes:

> I don't think that it makes much difference where the kids live or what occupation their parents have, as far as them getting along. I can see kids in groups more like the athletes hanging together, or the honor students being friends; in other words, I think that common interests is what bring the kids together more than geographic locations of their homes.

The Student Council President agrees:

> In junior high you get some of that [friction between kids coming from the different elementary buildings], some little groups, but after 8th grade it seems like they have all forgotten about it all. By high school there's no contest or anything between the schools, nobody cares.

However, the Senior Class president gives a partially different picture:

> The majority of the kids are close. But there are the extremes. Mostly I mean the out of town people, the farm kids, they hang around with each other.

As one parent who has lived in Filbey since she started High School told us:

> I know when I came to High School [at Yorkville], if you came from Filbey you didn't fit in, and this was a stigma: you know, they'd say 'Where do you live?' Well, you know in your gut there's some people you just didn't tell because you knew you wouldn't fit in... [But] my kids have not had any of that problem. They have had no problem with that, but there are still some feelings, I guess.

One student sees it this way:

> It seems like the ones who are out of town are usually farmers; not usually, but some of them are. I used to think, 'Well, you know, they are probably a farmer's child and they're going to be put down and stuff,' but a lot of times the farmers' children are the

> most popular. I don't know why, but I think that it mainly depends on the person and if they are likeable or not. I don't think that there is a lot of class discrimination, besides what every school probably has.

Discrimination is along other lines. This girl is a Jehovah's Witness.

> We don't celebrate Christmas, and don't celebrate most of the holidays, and that is sort of special when you are younger, in the elementary grades. A lot of times the teachers will push it at you, because it is the way they feel; and the kids will pick on you, but you learn to overcome it. They know that you are different, and not so worldly-wise as they are, I guess.

People give different reasons for the problems faced by students who were forced to change schools. First, there was the difference in sheer numbers. Wheeler, the year prior to its closing, had a total K-6 enrollment of 62. Even when the buildings were first opened, enrollments were so low that classes were "doubled up" into first/second, third/fourth, and fifth/sixth grades, plus one kindergarten class. By the time of the closings, however, the first and second grades had been split to improve reading instruction. Thus there were only five teachers, and most of the time a youngster would stay with a teacher for two years. The average class size was about 15 in the upper grades, and less than 10 in the lower grades. Contrast this with an enrollment of 350 and 15 teachers at the Hillside school, with an average class of about 23 students, and hence less opportunity for one-to-one teacher contact.

Nowadays there is still a big change in going into the centralized sixth grade at the main J.H.S.H. campus, being confronted with lots of strangers, including older teenagers from the high school (although there is not much contact between the sixth graders and the older students.)

> My daughter, when she got to junior high [from Filbey the year before it was closed], I mean, Hey! You're talking about a young girl, twelve years old... well, she couldn't handle it, nope. She was always a good student, but she had to give up her clarinet, she had to give up things in order to keep her marks up. It was just too big a transition. It was just too much. Some of her best friends she didn't see all day.

This child clearly had a hard time going from the small, family-like school to the (relatively) large and (relatively) urban village school. The change today is not as drastic as it was when this student moved up to junior high, because the elementary schools are so much larger now. Presumably those second graders who were moved when the schools closed would have had a much harder time making the adjustment.

Another difference is that at present every sixth grader goes through the same experience together. Everyone is new, not just "those dumb farm kids." Everyone has to make new friends, not just a few outsiders entering a group where everyone already has as many friends as they need, where the lines are already drawn. Further, since rural and urban students are mixed from the start, the differences -- if there are any -- seem to matter less to them; and there cannot be any rural or urban stigma

attached to attending any particular elementary school because the elementary schools are "integrated".

The School Board "promised them we'd never sell the buildings without their approval." Actually, the whole district is allowed to vote, but the Board scheduled special elections where the only issue was whether to sell the building; the idea being that no one who was not a local resident would care enough to vote. So far, the rest of the district has acted predictably; but it is not clear whether they will feel any obligation to refrain from voting when they do care what happens.

A discrepancy comes in here, because how to use each facility, or indeed whether to use them at all, is a Board decision, but the district residents must approve the sale of a building. So although the Board refuses to consider reopening the buildings, local residents retain hopes and refuse to allow the buildings to be sold. The community voted against selling the unused buildings three times. Or really only twice: one offer the Board considered was never actually put to a vote, "because it was obvious from the turnout at the Board meeting that there was no sense in it. They [the local residents] were against it down to the last person."

Scott understands the problem: "The fear is that we'll need those buildings again." Everyone agrees that the district will soon need more classroom space, but the people in Filbey and Wheeler want their schools reopened. That is unlikely, he says:

> It would be foolish to open those buildings back up again. Because it is a lot cheaper;

> we only need classroom space, we don't need gym space, we don't need more administrators, we don't need more secretaries, parking lots. We could bring extra classrooms to the existing elementary schools here in town for a whole lot less than we ever could open up those buildings. Wheeler it's twelve or thirteen hard miles, and to start putting all the special people there -- special ed, art, music, p.e. -- to put them on the road and get them out there, you've lost a class period each way.

One parent tells us the building is still being heated, and the snow has to be shovelled regularly to allow access for the fire company.

> We just went through a bond issue here for a big addition on one of the [elementary] schools here, and the people [in Wheeler] sit and look at, drive by this school sitting there not being utilized, and it doesn't set well.
>
> I was bitter. I could look out back and see this big million dollar school sitting there -- well, more than a million, but you know. Or, when they put it up to vote and they were asking us to sell that school, at the last vote, for $32,000. I mean, I couldn't even build a house for $32,000. You couldn't get people to vote for that. It was nonsense.

So the building sits. Who would buy a school building, besides a school district? What else can it be used for?

"And they still are outraged. Not so much now." Now that the Filbey building is leased to BOCES for an EMR program, this has pacified most people: "They just didn't approve of it at all, and then to just see it sit there, not being used and deteriorating. It was like a chancre sore that didn't heal." Until it was used for something else, people still thought of it as their school, and the memories were attached.

Effects on the Communities

When one asks residents if there is a sense of neighborhoods, of separatism or sub-communities in the district, they nod their heads; but none of these people appeared to have this sense themselves, and what we found of it in others was initially quite puzzling. When the Wheeler school was closed five years ago, the community of Wheeler lost its community center. The school had been the meeting place for such school events as the Christmas concert and Parents' night, and for the girl scouts. The school was the only place in the community big enough to hold a meeting in. Now the school is boarded up and school events and girl scout meetings are at the Hillside school. "Everyone has just gotten used to driving into Yorkville whenever something is happening." Other than that, there is not any difference. But since there seems to be no such thing as a Wheeler community anymore, one must wonder: If the loss of a community means so little, was there ever such a thing, and was it worth trying to save?

Look at the case of Filbey.

> At one time, you had two or three businesses, two or three stores, a couple of gas stations, four active churches; and now you've got one store. Well, [today] you've got two stores, you've got a furniture store that's still there, and one gas station store, and that's about it. It's another one of those communities that was a very tightly-knit community with older people, and as the older people died off, people came in and bought their houses. We have a lot of welfare people, you know, and there aren't an

> awful lot of people that work. They're either retired or on welfare; or anybody that does work works in Yorkville. But it's still, well, I can't imagine living anywhere else.

If the decline of the community is attributable to the population change, it is conceivable that that has come about because there is no school to attract new residents, rather than because there are no jobs.

Judging from the outside, and after the play of events, it is hard to say whether there was something Wheeler residents were fighting for besides to save themselves and their children travel time. But their goal, their fight, and their passion certainly seemed real at the time.

As far as community feeling is concerned, parents whose children attend each of the other schools, Prescott and the ones in the village, express the same sort of loyalty and affection as the Wheeler parents did. My neighborhood, my school, is the best, or at least it is the one I want for my kids. In the economically thriving community of Prescott, which kept its school and has a growing population, "It's more like the Prescott school than a Yorkville school. The community takes pride in the community and its school. It is a major meeting place." We heard the same things from Riverbank and from Hillside residents. Here is a Hillside parent:

> I didn't want to sell the [empty] schools either, because I felt somewhere along the line after getting rid of them, they were going to want to build a middle school, which I was very much against; because I absolutely 100% refused to have my children go to any

> other building. I always felt that Hillside had the best teachers and the best principal, not that I had anything against the other ones... and it was close to home. We bought the house in the first place because it was close for my kids to walk, they could have walked it in less than five minutes. That was my choice, and I felt very strongly about it.

Some questions to ask about all this are these: (1) Are recalcitrant parents just being selfish, or are the consolidators callous violators of these young people's and parents' rights? (2) Supposing it is highly traumatic for youngsters to move from a very small to a not-very-small school, is it nevertheless a valuable learning experience, or can it be made one? Can we learn from this and other school closings so that in the future the experience can be made less traumatic? (3) If the trauma cannot be avoided, does the success of the eventual course of events and the "final product" justify putting a small group of youngsters through such an experience?

Here are some answers based on the experiences of Yorkville. (1) It is probably neither a case of selfishness on the part of parents nor of arbitrary power-wielding on the part of consolidation advocates. While it is true that the most salient reason for parents' support for the community school seems to be that it is close by, this concern is not wholly selfish. The selfish part of this concern is that they do not want to be continually driving into town for meetings and school events. But the main reason is that they feel strongly that their children will have more of the kind of education and experiences

they want them to have if they go to a small school near home, and they want them to have this education because they think it will be best for the children.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether a rational concern for the children's interests would breed the same kinds of preferences. There are many people who like where they live simply because they live there and they are comfortable with it. They do not want change. They already have their hopes and dreams adjusted to the future as they see it, and if someone comes in and changes their community, everything is out the window. As is natural, their concern for their children includes a concern that their children be able to live out the lives they, the parents, have dreamed for them. And they get angered and dismayed when they are told that they cannot have their dreams, and more angered still when they are told that their dreams are wrong.

To what degree these opinions ought to hold sway is not for us to decide. A school system that puts the child's interests first will take a more objective approach to a child's interests, not wishing to allow the parents' impose their preferences when this would restrict the child's education and opportunities. It will also consider that even though family harmony is important for a child's well-being, it cannot suffer very much just by giving the child a good education even against the parents' wishes. Those who want to consolidate schools and districts usually claim such an objective stance. Nevertheless, they must

deal appropriately with these parental feelings if they want to achieve a peaceful and successful transition.

(2) The transition experience certainly can be made easier for the students. It would take some effort on the part of both parents and administrators. Administrators need to realize that there are difficulties and stress involved in so radical a change in school environments, and they should devise ways to help the new students feel at home. Parents need to accept the facts once they become inevitable and to prepare their children for the change, rather than devoting all their energy to attempts to revive the dead.

(3) The final product is probably worth it, especially if effort is made to ease the emotional trauma. In Yorkville, some parents may still be bitter, but most of those who are bitter resent the way in which the schools were closed, and the way the School Board and the administration treated them. Most now agree that it was the best thing to do, as far as the children's educations were concerned. And many of those who do not are merely blinded from the facts by their resentment. Most of this could have been avoided

And the students have come through apparently undamaged, and many are receiving a "better" education, though with less personal attention in the earlier years. According to some parents, many of the younger students who were transferred from Wheeler and Filbey -- when those buildings were closed in 1981 -- to the Hillside and Riverbank schools, respectively, had a very

difficult time. One parent sees it this way: "You excel in certain things: you might be the best one in class in a certain subject, or you might be the best one out in the gymnasium to play basketball. You might be the top of twenty kids. But when you come into two hundred you are not the best anymore, and the kids felt it." In a group of twenty, almost everybody can be best at something, but it changes in a group of a few hundred."

But it is not clear that all or even most of the students felt any distress. This student was a seventh-grader when the two schools were closed:

> I remember that they had a sit-in and they were on the news, and they were all at one house saying that they weren't going to let their kids go, but they ended up letting them go... The kids didn't care. I think it was just their parents.

One parent states:

> I know I was strongly against [closing our local school]. And as I say, there's still people that are strongly against it. But I think if you took a poll right now, it's the parents [that object,] not the kids. No sir, I don't think that it's affected the kids one-eighth of what it's affected the parents. The kids, you know, I don't think it's affected them at all. You know, kids have a way of adapting to any situation.

This makes one wonder again just how much the parents were concerned about their kids, and how much about something else?

Yorkville Today

Now that the excitement has died down and there has been opportunity for getting used to the arrangements, most people are

satisfied or very satisfied with their children's schools. Two parents expressed these views:

> Some of them don't see the benefits, no. I mean, there's pros and cons. For one thing, there's always problems with buses. Kids get a liberal education on the school bus, you know? Some mothers don't like their little first grade daughters going to Yorkville and having to ride that bus. But is there any comparison to the advantages that you're going to have with your education? Oh no, there is definitely still bitterness in Filbey, and there always will be, particularly until the older generation that is there now that voted on the centralization, until they are gone.

> The transition was the biggest thing, yeah. It was hard for the kids. But, progress goes on, as far as I'm concerned. Some people will say, 'They shouldn't even have High School here [because it's too small.]' Well, I don't know that. I mean, I think we have a pretty good high school right here as far as the curriculum goes and the extra-curricular activities. The kids can do and have just about anything they want or take any subject they want, and I think that there's just no comparison [with the education in the Filbey school]. I was completely against closing the school. I loved the little rural schools, they're part of our history... It's part of our heritage, but life goes on. Now, I look back at it and I have to admit... I can see now, I can see.

However, Yorkville may be a special case. It is not clear that very much of the district's success is attributable to the recent school closings. For example, as mentioned above, they did not result in any budgetary reduction. Much of the credit for whatever success Yorkville has had seems to be due to the superintendent who followed Barnette in 1981, Leo Reese.

Reese tells us:

> When I came in, my job was to smooth ruffled feathers. Barnette was an ass-kicker. There was a lot of anger, and even more non-involvement. I use more of a velvet glove. Our problems were lack of credibility in the community, poor morale, and fiscal unsteadiness.

Most of the people we talked to agreed that it was the financial problems that were mainly responsible for the others. One parent said:

> I think the parents are pretty supportive of the school. I think Mr. Reese has done an excellent job of running the school and the budget, for instance, passes every time the first time around. He's very good about managing the money and trying to keep the taxes down and still do the most that he can for the school and for the children.

Reese describes his method of success:

> I started with a complete line item review of the whole budget. We went through it three times, and discussed it with our people. Every expense was to be on a needs basis. I'm a penny-pincher, I'm very frugal. We went so far as to count all inventory and subtract that from purchase requests. Now we've done it five times, the entire [budget] process, once each year, with the same effort, and everyone is coming to know what we expect.

Apparently this is what the district's finances required:

> Taxes have been essentially the same for the last five or six years. We don't have financial problems. The last several years we have finished with a surplus of about a million dollars.

As an example of what they have been able to do, they are now in the midst of a tremendous $6.5 million construction project, including energy conservation and roofing projects for the elementary buildings, and at the J.H.S.H., improvements to

music and home economics facilities, a new auditorium, and a swimming pool. Various swimming pool projects have been voted down in the past, but this one was approved by more than 4:1. Here is what appear to be the two main reasons: the people think that it will be open at night and families can go in and go swimming, and Reese and the School Board promised that it would not raise taxes at all. What is just as remarkable as the fact that people believed them -- which shows how drastically the climate has changed in recent years -- is the fact that they are succeeding.

The State aid formula for such projects is based largely on two factors. First, district fiscal capacity: Yorkville's is below the 25th percentile in the state. Second, the local full value property tax rate, which is taken to be a sign of the district's willingness to make sacrifices: Yorkville's is over $19 per thousand (true value), above the 71st percentile. The project qualified for 75% State aid, but since they arranged the project so that work proceeds in phases, while the State aid comes up front, they ended up with a large surplus of cash on hand, which they have been able to reinvest. Combined with the savings generated by Reese's detailed review of each budget item, the interest on the State's contribution, compounded over several years, will be enough to cover all of the district's 25% share.

According to Reese, a lot of this success is due to his business manager: "She's a genius. She's made all of this possible." 'All of this' refers to financing the new building

project with no tax increase, and more generally keeping taxes down for the past five years. Not only has there been no tax increase for the past five years, but there has actually been an overall decrease in the tax levy.

Another way Reese gains support is by giving it. In his words, he has been able to mend teacher-administration relationships because, "I'm honest, open, and straightforward." If someone has difficulty or is in trouble because of some "greedy self-serving interests," he will not stand for it, he will harass them and tell them to straighten out. "But I'll fight and fight hard" for someone when their concern is well-placed.

The teacher contract has been a problem in past years. "But Reese seems to have a better relationship [with the union.] You hear less talk about the contract." However, last year the contract was not settled until November. The union is still trying to get back some of the benefits they lost during Barnette's tenure. According to one veteran Board member:

> The teachers come into the negotiations loaded up with a lot of emotional baggage. (Apparently he feels there's still some resentment left from before Reese.)
>
> Over a period of time these people have to get sorted out what their priorities are. Now in any negotiation the priority is money, but it takes awhile for all of them to realize that that is what their priority is.

The teachers did get an increase this year: they had asked for a 10% or 11% increase, but the Board offered less than 6%. They settled on 8.5% this year and 8% next year, and additionally

the Board raised starting salaries over the two years to keep up with the national trends. The starting salary has gone from $13,826 last year to $15,500; next year it goes to $16,960.

One of Reese's major accomplishments was to achieve a smooth running School Board. Personalities are no longer a factor in Board deliberations, even though "they're a wide range of people, a good cross-section. Few of them would be good friends or even know each other except for being on the Board." We expect he is quite right about this. Currently serving on the board are a building contractor, a farmer, an engineer, a seller, a blue-collar worker and a blue-collar housewife, a plant foreman, a small business proprietor, and a retired military man. This group would appear to be a representative mix of the Village community in terms of occupation, and as in the community, about 50% have attended college.

According to Reese, there are no more voting blocks or factions; the Board members now "decide matters on the issues." There are sometimes disagreements, but they respect each other's opinions. And they can laugh about it: "Oh yeah, you're the maverick tonight." This is funny only because they are mostly veterans who remember the very different meetings of the late seventies. The board is getting complacent again, with the current success. Things are going well and the meetings are short: "pass, pass, pass."

Reese takes credit for this. "My job is to anticipate every contingency, and methodically investigate and present the facts

and possibilities. I deluge them with information. I want to make them look good." And they often do. One Board member has "even had people come up to [him] on the streets and say: 'Geez, you know, you ought to go down to South Fork and tell them how to straighten things out; because they'll believe you.'"

Of course everyone is not satisfied. The poor farm economy has made the farmers' tax burden quite high, and there is some resentment on that score. What is more, there remains some resentment and distrust lingering from the days of the school closings. But these factions are not powerful. They are treated as mere disruptions of the normal business.

> A few years ago there was a [revival of a] taxpayers association that became active, and they came to Board meetings and made a lot of noise and got two members elected. Then they got on the Board and they didn't make that much difference.
>
> We had a guy who was in business downtown and he was going to run for the board and change everything all over, and he won, and he lasted about six months and then resigned because the rest of the board just wouldn't work with him. There's always some individual that wants to do something because of his own personal feelings, and he's going to solve the whole problem. But the reason I came to Yorkville in the first place is because generally there isn't that divisiveness, aren't those personality conflicts: people are interested in what's best for the kids.

Normalcy is the order of the day. Joe Marino is president of the School Board:

> I think that most of the board members recognize that the School Board's job is not to run the school, so far as the day-to-day activities and those type of things: it is

> pretty well left up to the administration, which is the way that it should be.

Another board member told us:

> [The schools] don't have support really, just a higher degree of apathy that some like to call support. They don't come out to vote the budget down, because they found out that if they come out to vote the budget down, all they're going to do is cut out athletics. They can't get to the things they want to get to, administrative salaries, teacher salaries; those are the things that make the townspeople mad.

At the last vote for a budget measure the turnout was only 300, or around 4%. Few people turn out for school board elections, few people run for seats, and few people complain. "I have very, very few calls. In general I do not think that the board gets too many calls at all from the people in the community. The sports area seems to elicit more response from the public than any other area of the school operation." Does satisfaction breed apathy? Nearly everyone appears willing to leave everything in Reese's hands.

A long-time veteran Board member has only praise for Reese:

> "He has what we knew would probably gel: he was tough, but yet he had the respect of the staff working with him. I thought, maybe he could bring things full circle and put us back into the business of educating and out of the business of busting heads. And lo and behold, he has.

One conclusion we draw from this up and down story is that in this school district, as in many other small schools and districts around the country, the importance of the single individual cannot be overestimated. The superintendent runs the

school. The smaller the district, the easier it is for the superintendent to control more decisions. If they make good decisions, or if they hire good people and let them make decisions, then the school is a success. Otherwise everyone suffers.

As we see it, Yorkville is where it is today -- a good school district with prospects for better -- because of Leo Reese, a hard-worker, sympathetic and good with people, decisive yet open-minded, clever, with a clear sense of priorities. The School Board deserves some credit for its recent decisions, but at least as much blame for its earlier ones. Whether they have been stupid and then wise, or unlucky and then lucky, we would suggest that Yorkville might now be an excellent school district if someone like Reese had been hired in the 1950's, and that it would be a horrendous district if someone like Reese had not been found.

Another area where this principle can be seen at work is in Yorkville's initiation to computers. They tried initially to introduce computers without thinking about how or why, and they did not have anyone knowledgeable enough to decide for them. The initial attempt to introduce computers into the high school was less than successful, as H.S. Principal Bill Carson admits:

> We bought the wrong equipment. At first we didn't know anything about it. We asked some local people who told us they were experts, but they didn't know anything more than we did.

There is a BOCES person who comes in one day a week, dividing his time between four districts. Because his time is so limited, all he has been able to do is help individual teachers with individual problems. There was also some trouble surrounding the in-service programs, again with people who held themselves out as experts but did not have any more knowledge than anyone else.

They finally hired a "real sharp" teacher, who teaches the three programming courses and some math in the High School. She was hired by the district after being certified at State. She was given wide discretion in planning the district's hardware and software acquisitions, or at least her views were taken far more seriously than anyone else's. Anyone who knew anything at all about computers would have been a lifesaver to this district.

The main use of computers right now seems to be instruction and drill for remedial students, but they have plans to expand their facilities. They have allocated funds, but they do not know what to buy because they do not know what they already have.

The district has purchased with its own money computers for the elementary grades. These are used mainly for classroom instruction and by those in the computing clubs. They have decided not to aim for "a computer for each student" They do not have enough extra space, and they do not see it as a wise use of money: "If there's a staff member that's not going to use it, it's like when we went through and put a TV in every classroom. What's the point of having it sit there?"

The machines are transported between the three buildings in a converted mobile home. It is equipped with twelve Apple micros and three printers, and all they have to do is drive it into the parking lot and plug it in. Each elementary building gets it for one day a week, and must sign up for the other two days.

Another thing they have been trying to do is put the library catalog on computer -- also fines, books checked out, etc.. The project has been going on for over a year, but there are still a lot of bugs in the database program. The person who started it left to pursue a graduate degree, "and the thing just fell apart once he left." Now they have hired some Computer Science majors from a nearby college to work on debugging, but they have been too busy with their own schooling. Again it appears that with small school operations, often one person must be relied upon to make or break a project, and if that person leaves, or is not well-qualified, or is not well-liked, the whole thing can collapse.

Educational Quality

General Performance and Attitudes

If when it comes to schools bigger is better, then we should expect Yorkville to be a better school than otherwise equivalent smaller schools. Bigness is widely thought to enable schools to operate better programs at the same per-pupil expenditure level; or alternatively, to operate equal programs at lower cost. Some

quality measures have already been discussed, viz. extra-curricular activities and some of the facilities. The quality measures discussed below are: other facilities and curricular offerings, test scores, college entrance, teaching, and student and parental attitudes.

Contrary to what one might expect after looking at the Comprehensive Assessment Report (CAR), data from college entrance exams appears to indicate that Yorkville does a good job in teaching. Tom Macphee, guidance counselor for grades 10-12, explains:

> If a kid is here for an extended period of time at the secondary level, I think if he tries at all he will achieve. I get intrigued by the differences between SAT and ACT scores of our students. You know, the SAT is an aptitude test, and the ACT is an achievement test. And using the State Education Department's chart for preparing scores, our average kid will score one standard score higher on the ACT than on the SAT.

That indicates to him that a Yorkville student achieves higher than a student with the same aptitude who attends a different school; in other words, that the Yorkville student learns more. While this use of scores on these tests is not recommended by the testing services, the idea is intriguing.

However, the CAR indicates that Yorkville is a perfect academically average medium-sized central school district. Medium-sized central school districts do perform better on State-mandated tests and have from 5-15% less students falling below the Statewide Reference Point (SRP) (or any given test)

than the State average. Nevertheless, the high school's business teacher complains that: "When I get students their English skills could be sharper, their general math skills could be sharper ...

McPhee told us that:

> About 50% of our kids go to college directly from high school. Frankly, this area is not getting the raw material it was getting when I first came here. Nineteen years ago we were doing about 70% college prep. People are moving in here from all over because of cheap housing. But why they would come here looking for work I don't know.

One college bound student told us there were "roughly five to ten percent going on to college." His perception of the community as uneducated is rather exaggerated. "Most of those who go to college will attend a SUNY or State college. This year we'll probably send twenty to [the nearest state college]." But according to our student survey, although more than half of 11th and 12th graders plan to go to college, 40% of them plan to attend two-year colleges, contrary to what the guidance counselor told us. Last year 13 graduates went to private colleges, all in New York State except for one who went to Princeton. These private schools in New York State are excellent, but only one student out of a class of 130 went out of state.

There is little agreement on who is responsible for what may appear to be low educational aspirations and achievement. Proponents of large schools argue that small schools cannot attract high quality teachers because they cannot pay high salaries and do not offer attractive living environments.

Proponents of small schools claim that the greater amounts of direct teacher contact are more beneficial than many think.

The informal teacher contact can be important to young people:

> I think that being in a small school you have more attention and you know that the teachers care ... The teachers, we have them over and over again, so you get to know them and they know what to expect and stuff ... they try to be friends with you outside of school, too. They come to see you in the sports, they come to your concerts and, you know, just the extra activities that you do, and they ask about them, too. I am involved with the teachers a lot because I babysit for some. They are more like friends to you. My Student Council advisor was my social studies teacher, and she was just like a mom, you know, I could always go to her whenever I needed anything.

One teacher moved into the village when he took the job, and thinks it is important to be a part of the community: "It just gives you a little bit more insight into the kids." He is unhappy that they now seem to be hiring more people from out of the area.

On the other hand, the student sees some disadvantages as well:

> They have an idea like they know who you are; and so when something is bothering you or whatever, they always bug you, they always ask what is wrong. And sometimes you just don't want to talk about it. And that's what I don't like about it: they can always tell.

It seems that a lot of teachers do take an interest in what the kids are doing. "My friend writes, and the teachers are

really encouraging her to enter her short stories and projects, and they [generally] encourage you to try to move on."

As was mentioned earlier, some serious disputes have centered on the teacher contract. This year the contract was not ratified until November, and the deliberations became acrimonious. There was a memo sent to all teachers saying "not to extend yourself" until the contract was settled, but many attended curricular planning/coordinating meetings, even in the summer. Of course many did heed the message as well.

Indeed, the wholly positive view of the district's teachers is not unanimous:

> I feel that the teachers today don't care as much as they did when my children were in the elementary school. They just think it's a job. I'm not saying this is all of them, I'm saying some of them are coming in to get the high wages that Yorkville has. But I also feel that every one of the teachers earns every cent that they get, because the kids today are really rotten.

But some teachers pass the buck back to the parents. Compare this teacher's view:

> I think that the biggest problem today is the students' attitude when they come into the school. And I think that is a reflection on the parent and the home. A lot of kids just don't care, don't want to learn... and I think that that is the way they are brought up, and I blame that on the parents.

It is important to remember that the teachers and other school personnel are much more educated than the general populace in Yorkville.

A Hillside parent maintained that:

> If the school needs something, the people are out there getting it. I don't believe that there is anything that the school could ask me to do that I would refuse to do. I would bend over backwards.

However, this may not be the prevalent attitude. One teacher says: "I sometimes feel that academics take a back seat to athletics as far as the parents' involvement [goes]."

This parent agrees:

> You have on one hand parents who are real supportive of the sports program, have their kids there and devote all their time to sports, and on the other hand, the ones that really could use support from their parents, they don't get any. You have a lot of parents that just send their kids to school: it's like a babysitter for them. They don't care what their grades are or that type of thing; and I especially found that sort of thing when I was on the COH [Committee on the Handicapped]. A lot of parents didn't care what you did with their child.

As the guidance counselor sees it:

> I guess a lot of kids just do not get encouragement for going to college from the home, because of the financial matters and because of the family unit. It's also been very difficult to overcome the feeling of some parents that they have to send their kid to a state school because it's cheaper.

Very often it is not, but it can be very difficult to convince someone who does not maintain an open mind. The counselors offer financial aid workshops and arrange with several nearby schools for a "college fair" each year. But the workshops are poorly attended, and the better colleges rarely send representatives to the fair. McPhee takes this perspective:

> I think it's more a problem of educating parents than kids. You know, it's funny. In

> some cases you get parents who are without education, and they realize that that's the only way that their son or daughter is going to get ahead. And they'll be ready to hear about all kinds of [guidance] services, which is great. But you also have a lot of kids with potential who come from parents who have not had the college experience behind them: they're looking more for the kids to get through high school and get some sort of training and a job. Except that's also a problem sometimes with parents who do have a college education.

Parents can push in other ways, too. One of Yorkville's brightest and hardest working students wanted to go out for the tennis and basketball teams, but his parents discouraged him: they thought is might take too much time from his studies, and they wanted to make sure that he maintained his high grades. However, these parents are the exception in Yorkville.

To get parents involved, Sommerfeld (the DEE) holds regular "parent group meetings" throughout the district, rotating the location between the three elementary buildings.

> I survey parents and try to find out what [are the] things we covered in the previous year that they felt good about and what they would like to hear more about, and [ask for] any suggestions they might have. We have tried to encourage parents to speak out and mention, you know, 'This is a need that we have,' and I feel a real responsibility in addressing a need like that at some level.

The guidance office does what they can, too. There are two guidance counselors at the J.H.S.H., one for grades 7-9 and one for grades 10-12. There used to be three counselors, but: they went through a process of personalities." In other words, one of the counselors did not get along with the administration, and did

not do what they wanted. (We could not discover the details.) Because of the difficulty of firing anyone, they made some structural changes to create a pretense for getting rid of this person, and he or she was "laid off". But because of a provision in the union contract, they have to wait seven years to hire a replacement (five of those have elapsed); until then that person has a right to their job back if it is recreated. The lack of counseling has been cause for complaint.

The counselors say they are overworked, and some students had complaints about insufficiencies in the help that was available to them. One student ran into a problem applying to take an ACT a second time because she was not notified by the guidance office of her deficiency early enough. She thinks every student should have more than just one meeting per year with their guidance counselor. Further:

> It seems like they concentrate on just the exceptionally intelligent kids; getting the scholarships, you know, telling them what they have to do and about requirements. I didn't feel that they do that for everyone, and I don't like that at all.

Yet one of those "exceptional" kids told us that the guidance office did not really do much, except to make certain materials available. He thinks they should:

> Sit down with each and every one of the seniors and help them plan what to do, and help them out with their various application materials and procedures. Here you're expected to do it all on your own. We have the resources, but that's as far as it goes.

Special Ed

Yorkville's special ed programs are offered right in the district, so the students do not have to be transported back and forth to the BOCES. What some do have to do, however, is go to a different school every two years. Because there is only space for one EMR ("educably mentally retarded") class at each building, the EMR students must change buildings every two years as they move towards high school. Facilities for other students with special needs are more complete.

Although classes for the handicapped are held in the district buildings, almost all the teachers are BOCES employees. Basically, the BOCES rents the classroom space from the district. The district employs one speech teacher, who handles the severe speech and language program. From the BOCES they use fifteen full-time specialists, including two speech teachers who work in a mobile unit. They have self-contained programs "all the way up", with resource rooms at all four buildings. "The main programs that we don't have right here within the district are services for the severely emotionally handicapped [the "emotionally disabled, or ED]." The BOCES runs programs for them in other districts, and the students are bused. All of these are in individual school districts. There is no central BOCES facility designed for special ed.

One apparent advantage of this small school is that they have the time necessary to thoroughly investigate various

placement possibilities for each special ed. student, and each member of the COH gets to know each child.

> We have established what we call 'elementary consultation teams' (ECT's). When I first participated here on the COH, I noticed that there were times when the referrals [of students to the COH for special treatment or consideration] were not totally appropriate, because a lot of [remedial measures] that should have been taken at the building level hadn't even been tried. Our ECT's function at the building level. Through the ECT we gathered classroom teacher, speech and language teacher, remedial teacher, building principal, and one of our school psychologists: anybody that touches base with a given kid who's having some kind of academic or behavioral difficulty. Each of them analyzes the student's needs on like a seven-page form, a different form for different personnel.

The ECT then meets to discuss the student and it is clearer to them what has been and what has yet to be tried.

The regional associate for the BOCES pays them periodic visits, and once after observing a meeting of the COH said: 'I bet if I hadn't showed up you were going to videotape it and try to convince me it was routine for your district.' That meeting was a ten-week review of a placement. A lot of times when they are trying a placement that differs substantially from what the student had been doing, The COH will decide at the annual review to review the situation after ten weeks to evaluate it and possibly change it. Without such a procedure, the child's whole year could be wasted. The parent was at the meeting and was very pleased with the how her son was doing; but she had not always been in the past.

According to Sommerfeld, who chair's the COH as part of her duties as Director of Elementary Education, how the parents react:

> depends strongly on the groundwork that you lay through your building people in terms of preparing that parent for what you're concerned about or what you expect may be the problem, and how it may need to be addressed.

If the placement involves attending a different school, Sommerfeld tries to prepare them for that, too:

> I try to set up with the parents and pick up the child and the parents and take them for a visit to see the class, meet the teacher, and learn the layout of the school before I start transferring them there. I think that helps and I think the times I've done that made it far more positive for everybody involved than the times that I wasn't able to do that.

She added that:

> I think it's a cultural factor in our area, that there are some students who have so few experiences before they enter school that we have begun to accept -- and I'm still not totally comfortable with this -- that some of those students are going to need a little bit longer time to catch hold. They may just be deprived, and then once they reach that readiness level they begin making progress in a more normal rate.

In light of this kind of situation, the district has recently made two changes. For one, they switched to a full day kindergarten for all students. It used to be that kids with some special needs would be in full-day programs, but the vast majority would be put in half-day classes. But sometimes that would result in "atrocious groupings of kids" in the full day classes: "We found that there were not enough [brighter] kids in

there to stimulate those [lesser ability] kids." Now the kids who need a little extra are evenly distributed among the kindergarten classes.

The second change was to start a pre-first grade program. Instead of going directly from kindergarten to first grade, some students take a year of what may be thought of as "advanced kindergarten." After that year they progress into a regular first grade class. There is only one pre-first class, and those from the other two elementary buildings are bused in. They located the program at Riverbank because "that was the only building with a room available at the time."

> That seems to be helping, there seem to be a number of students who need at least three years to do kindergarten, first grade, and something else. They don't necessarily need to repeat kindergarten, and they're not really ready for what's going to be expected of them at the first grade level: they need more experiences, more developmental types of experiences.

Sometimes they will discover during the pre-first year that the student really is handicapped, and then they find another placement for them. Unfortunately, "it very quickly got labelled the 'dummy' class, and a variety of other things, and we're still dealing with that, because the results are coming out so well."

Course Offerings

Yorkville has the capacity for its students to major or "sequence" in a few subjects that are unavailable at some other small schools, e.g. math/science, art, music, and home economics.

They also have a heavier offering of electives. Reese once taught at a K-12 district with 650 students. As he sees it, the difference is not that Yorkville offers more, but that they can offer many electives each year, while the smaller district had to offer them in alternate years. Still, even Yorkville cannot manage to offer art, or home economics -- i.e. fashion, sewing, cooking -- electives every year; these courses have a very small clientele, a very small number of talented students who wish to pursue them past what is required. The offerings are complete enough so that a student can sequence in art or in home economics, or they cannot take, say, painting each year.

One student implied that smallness might mean lower quality in some ways:

> I'm just going through the motions in Health, it's really just a common sense course. Because you can take it anytime from tenth to twelfth grade, so you have to make it a little easier for the tenth graders, so for the seniors it is no problem.

Less than ten percent of Yorkville graduates have taken advanced placement (AP) courses. But the High School does not offer very many: for instance, there are no AP science courses. There are only two AP courses regularly available, Basic Calculus and English. Like other comparably-sized districts, they offer Regent's electives in Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Earth Science each year, but only one section of a non-Regent's science elective, Biology. One student we talked to had already taken all the science (and math) courses they had. He talked to both the Chemistry and Physics teacher about doing an AP course

independently, but the school did not have the facilities to perform the necessary experiments and lab work.

Offerings in Social Studies are limited. Besides History there is only one "disciplinary" social science elective offered each year, such as Economics, Psychology, Sociology, or Anthropology. Actually, this has changed with the new Interactive Telecommunications (I.T.) facility. (See below for more on this development.) This year both Psychology and Sociology are being offered, but these are the only Social Studies electives being offered.

The Regent's Action Plan calls for one year of foreign language study for every junior high student. The administration was committed also to retaining a choice of languages at the H.S.: they offer French and Spanish. They used to teach Latin too, but it is being phased out, and the last students but one are now in their last year, Latin III. The other student is being allowed to continue in Latin II, and Latin III next year, because of the telecommunications project.

District officials were worried that if they chose either French or Spanish for the junior high, it would become "a stepping stone to the high school language," and that because of the small number of students to start with, this would destroy the high school program in the other language. The solution was to offer Latin. Some people, especially the H. S. Principal, claim that instruction in Latin improves the students' skills in English. But it is also important to point out that the district

already had a teacher certified in Latin and English, with twenty-five years experience in the district. Half the eighth graders take Latin the first semester and half take Health; then they switch for the second semester.

Another unique aspect of Yorkville is its extensive agricultural program. This is made possible in part by the school's proximity to the fairgrounds. The fair commission has leased almost the entire fairgrounds to the school for one dollar: the lease extends for 99 years, except for the four weeks each summer when the fair is on or in preparation. Students raise live animals, and grow and harvest crops. They have "two dairy heifers, one beef [cow], two pigs, and seven sheep."

Many people claim that smaller schools face greater scheduling difficulties than larger schools because they are not able to offer as many sections of each course and thereby force their students into more course conflicts. Yorkville has switched from a five- to a six-day week in order to avoid potential difficulties.

On the six-day cycle each school day has a number, e.g. if Monday is '1', Tuesday '2'... Friday '5', next Monday '6', next Tuesday '1', etc. If they miss a day because of snow or a holiday, they just continue where they left off. The administrator who described the system to us indicated that this convenience for handling snow days was the reason for making the switch from a normal Monday-Friday schedule.

Alternatively, one of the science teachers claims that the six-day cycle was started to make it easier to schedule gym and music. Since most gym and music classes are offered on alternating days, a five-day week creates scheduling nightmares; the only way to divide it is M,W,F and Tu, Th, which is uneven. With a six-day week, classes can meet every two days or every three days and still work out evenly at the end of the "week".

About 250 students receive private or small group lessons (with 2 to 5 students per group), which meet only once per week. The Junior High Band, Junior High Orchestra, 6th grade Chorus, and 7-8th grade Chorus meet every other day, alternating with a 6th or 7th grade General Music course. The Senior High Band, Orchestra, and Choir alternate with instrumental and vocal lessons. On the days when their group is not rehearsing, the students attend gym class. To complicate matters, two teachers have to travel between the several buildings for classes or lessons. The music teachers cannot always keep track of the schedule, and sometimes they do not know what class they are teaching next until the students start showing up: "But the kids don't seem to have any problem." It is no wonder that, according to the principal, most smaller districts can only offer these programs after school, or not at all

Gym classes meet every other day, with twenty to thirty kids in each section. The small number of coaches relative to the number of interscholastic teams causes further scheduling problems. They used to have regular teachers coaching all the

teams, but now most of the staff has 20-25 years experience and are "less inclined" to take on coaching duties. To replace them, the district has hired two coaches-cum-permanent substitutes. In addition to filling in for absent teachers, each coaches a team in each of the three athletic seasons in the school year. That still covers only six of the twenty High School and four Junior High teams Yorkville fields: the rest of the spots remain filled by regular teachers. For instance, one Social Studies teacher -- who teaches a full load of five periods and study hall -- also coaches three Varsity teams. There is extra pay for coaching.

The science teachers are unhappy, because with the change to the six-day cycle, "students now receive 18% less lab time, with the same curriculum and labs." That is because they have lab periods once every six days instead of once every five days. They think the students are getting cheated, and the public too, considering all the commotion about a shortage of scientists and declining science knowledge and test scores.

The six-day cycle also made it possible to eliminate one art teacher, because it is now possible for someone to travel between the elementary buildings to teach. Of course it means that the students get less art instruction, once or twice every six days instead of once or twice every five days.

But even such innovative scheduling ideas have not been able to solve every scheduling conflict. Two common scheduling difficulties smaller schools face are (i) time conflicts between Regent's and vocational courses, (ii) time conflicts for students

who fail a course or otherwise do not easily fit the common pattern.

According to a student:

> I am going for secretarial [at BOCES], but I am still going for a Regent's Diploma. I am not headed for college, but I still want a really good education and I might as well get it while I'm here. (There is a problem with squeezing things in, but) there is never a time that they don't put you in a course that you want, I don't think.

She is not alone in thinking this: "If you've got the approval of the teacher, the guidance office is definitely flexible."

Nevertheless, these students are exceptional: It is a rare student who is willing and able to take both a Regent's and a vocational program. And since 40% will take a vocational program, a lot of students are affected. One of the guidance counselors says: "The day just isn't long enough, with the traveling. Although it's only 29 miles [to the BOCES] it takes at least an hour." (And most of these are kids who spend an hour or more riding to and from the school itself anyway.) Since the classes are two-and-a half hours long, they are only at the school for three periods a day. A Regent's diploma requires, among other things, 4 years of English and History, 2 years of Math and Science, 1 year of "Introduction to Occupations," 2 three-unit sequences, and 3 years of a foreign language. In short, it is close to impossible for a normal vocational student to attain a Regent's diploma: already there are only about ten kids each year who are able to do both.

> The student who goes to vocational school in grades 11 and 12 will not have the opportunity to pick up either a third year of language, or the third year of another sequence, unless he happens to be in an accelerated program in grade eight.

Some scheduling problems are alleviated by the district's summer school offerings. The summer program is partially financed by tuition charges. The primary offerings are make-ups of required courses, so kids who have failed can still graduate on time; of course, many students also use summer school to accelerate their program and allow them free time in their senior year. Also during the year, some kids who have failed may take the course again as independent study. Most, however, are advanced as if they had passed: the teachers give them extra individual help, and they are given a placement exam in January. If they fail, they can drop back into the original course, or they might end up in individual study because of schedule conflicts.

Summer is also the time students can take driver's education. It turns out to be cheaper in the summer because the car rentals are not for as long a time period. It is also hard to fit into those tight schedules.

One question that consistently arises when planning the school schedule is class size. Carson: "We usually cut courses with two or three or four kids in them. This year we cut a number of home economics courses. We cut an elective in Soc. Sci. because there were only four kids involved." But they do not make cuts once the year is underway. In the Spring a list of

potential courses is distributed to the students, who use it to select the courses they want the next year. Then based on a compiled sign-up list, the course and teacher schedules are made. It is at this point that a course will be cut, or any scheduling difficulties resolved. All the teacher assignments are completed well before the end of the prior school year.

Some kids also miss out on some shop classes because they are handled by the BOCES, not the district. Yorkville is allotted a certain number of spaces in each program, but next year, for example, the number of kids from Yorkville who want to take welding is seven more than their allotment. They will try to send some to a different BOCES -- which will be a longer bus ride -- but failing that, some are simply not going to be able to take it.

Interactive Telecommunications Project

This past year Yorkville has embarked on a modern and relatively unique program for sharing educational resources with two nearby districts. The program is known as "I.T", which stands for 'interactive telecommunications'. In effect, the three districts have established their own television station.

Mr. D'Angelo talks to his AP English class about the idea of "pain" in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man . In front of him are twelve students, four television screens, and a video camera. Each monitor rests on a stand with a set of controls. One monitor, immediately to D'Angelo's left, shows his face and

shoulders. Another near the back of the room shows four students who are not in this classroom: they are in Jonesville, another school district sixteen miles away to the south. When one of them speaks, the students at Yorkville will turn around to watch on the monitor. In their classroom they also have monitors to view Mr. D'Angelo and his chalkboard, the students in Yorkville, and the students in a third district, Jones Forks, lying eleven miles west of Yorkville. All of the students in each of the three classrooms and the teacher can see and hear everything that is going on in each of the three classrooms.

The I.T. program began in the fall semester of 1985, when each of the three high schools had finished constructing a tower for transmitting and receiving audio and visual signals. Six sections were offered: Advanced Shorthand, Latin II, Psychology, English 11 (Non-Regents), AP English, and Business Law. The following spring one section of Health was added to the original six. Psychology had never been offered before in Yorkville, and AP English had not been offered in Jones Forks. Two main purposes of the I.T. were to increase course availability and ease scheduling conflicts, and it is doing that, at least for some students. Carson:

> We are teaching [a combined] keyboarding and computers to our sixth grade kids. The reason we are able to do that is because we found some time because of the I.T. project. We are picking up a course that is taught in Jonesville, which gives our one teacher -- who would otherwise have had to teach that course -- an opportunity to do something different.

The schools are anxious to increase their broadcasting capacity to two channels: thus in a seven period day they could conduct fourteen sections over the I.T. But the technology required to do this is not on the market yet. This will also require each school to equip another classroom with cameras, monitors, and microphones.

The two rooms without the teacher present each have the camera set at the front of the room and trained on the students. This enables the teacher to control all three classrooms and the students to interact with each other, regardless of how physically distant some may be. In the classroom with the teacher, the camera is set at the center rear of the room. It photographs the teacher standing in front of the chalkboard, but when the teacher moves away, the camera self-adjusts to focus on whatever is written on the board.

But the teacher does not have to write on the board every time they have something for the students to read. In the corner near the front desk there is a close-up camera mounted on a stand. With this camera, for instance, teachers can just lay their notebooks on the table, and the next day's assignment is televised for the students to copy directly. Mrs. Harper, the shorthand teacher, has one student dictate a letter while she transcribes for the close-up camera; not only can students in three different classrooms see her, but all the students can see her better. When a Jones Forks student in non-Regent's English has a question, she puts her paper under the close-up camera:

she can watch on the monitor while Mr. D'Angelo points to a particular word or sentence, and everyone else can see what they are talking about. When a filmstrip was shown everybody watched it on the monitors, even those who could have seen it "live."

The microphone, which looks like a large ashtray, usually sits on a desk in the center of the room, and has the capacity to pick up the voices of anyone present; although it is portable and can be passed from student to student when there happens to be a lot of background noise, or when a particular student speaks softly. The teacher also wears a personal microphone around the neck.

Learning to teach and to learn with I.T. poses a number of challenges. It takes some time for people to get used to the system. We asked one of the I .T. teachers for an evaluation of the experiment so far: "I think that it is unique, and the students who are successful like it. For those who are not it is a convenient scapegoat." But at least some student complaints seem legitimate. As one student put it:

> There are a lot of layers. That is one of the drawbacks. A lot of microphones that you have to get used to, and tape recorders, and the television: seeing yourself on the television for the first time was pretty weird, but we got used to that. It's pretty much the same [as a regular class,] but you can see the board a lot of times when you can't in the classroom because you can just look at the other two screens.

And the teachers we talked with agreed that problems existed. Their general view is that there was not adequate preparation time before the initial startup:

> We had a two day workshop and 'That's it, folks.' And we did some simulated demonstrations. I think that we could [get adequate training] in two days; but only with the right leaders, not with someone telling us it is all rosy and like that. You need someone in your school with experience.

Teachers thought they had other reasons to be reluctant to embrace the program: (i) Many were worried about the future elimination of positions; 'Why,' they thought 'would the district not fire teachers and pick-up their classes on TV instead?' (ii) The teachers' sense of professionalism was also threatened. A parent who is involved with the school described for us her impressions of a common attitude among teachers:

> It's my classroom, I do my duty behind closed doors, I teach my kids, this is what I do best, leave me alone. I don't want anyone viewing and criticizing me.

The I.T. is not used for observing and critiquing teachers in action, let alone for secretly spying on them (although it has occasioned a steady stream of professional and legislative observers at the rear of the classroom,) but these are perceived as serious possibilities, and serious threats, by many teachers.

The I.T. teachers have to be very well prepared.

> It does take extra work as far as planning and getting hard copies [of tests, worksheets, etc.] to the schools, and it doesn't allow me enough freedom. Having to write your lesson plans very specifically and meticulously: not that I don't anyway. But I have to live by them; because if I'm going to give a test on Tuesday, I can't be ahead of myself and say that we are going to have it on Monday now. Because there's a twenty-four hour turnaround to get those hard copies to the schools.

Materials go back and forth by shuttle several times a day. The shorthand teacher figures it takes three to five hours extra preparation each week. Once each semester she travels to Jones Forks and to Jonesville to teach the class from there, and meet with the students. This entails about ten extra hours for those two weeks, plus Yorkville has to arrange for a substitute to cover her other classes while she is on the road.

There are other distractions that remain, such as getting the volume adjusted and the chairs and cameras arranged before class every day. On the whole, the people involved in the program -- teachers, students, and administrators -- agree that other than the technical bugs, which are gradually being worked out, "discipline" is the biggest problem. Because of potential discipline problems, Ms. Harper, the shorthand teacher, thinks four should be the maximum number of kids in the other classrooms. "One I don't like because they can't exchange papers. Two is ideal, but three is of course an odd number, uncomfortable." One factor in choosing the courses to be offered was that the honors kids tend to be more attentive and to raise fewer discipline problems. If they wanted the program to stay, it had to work the first time.

But just getting started was a great hurdle. The coordination problems were immense. Bill Carson, the principal, had executive responsibility, and related his experience to us:[2]

> It took us three months to put together a common schedule. You might laugh, but it's true... What is important to Yorkville may not be important to Jones Forks; they had an

> eight period day, we had a seven period day; we started at 8:10, they started at 8:30. We are geographically much larger. It takes us an hour and some odd minutes to get all our kids in on the bus; now that we were [going to be] starting at 8:15 or 8:20, we had to get kids out of bed at quarter of six in the morning. Our building is so much larger than theirs, we need four minutes to pass our classes, they only need three. And then the BOCES ... it takes us five minutes to get to BOCES, it takes Jones Forks and Jonesville twenty. You know, all of those things come into play. We have such a population that we have to have three lunches, but one of them has to have two, and one only has to have one. On and on and on that dialogue goes, you develop schedule after schedule after schedule, and eventually you come to say: 'Hey! Hold it! Do you want it to work or don't you?' If you want it to work you take all of the sacred cows and forget about them.

One part of this massive project was selecting the classes to be offered and the teachers to handle them. In preparation for spring pre-registration, the three schools jointly made a master list of potential courses, ones that would be taught in any of the three schools. Any student could sign up for any course (for which they were eligible). An assortment of guidance counselors and principals got together and, using the combined pre-registration tallies, selected "the leanest." All teachers were asked to volunteer, but some were either begged, prodded, or pressured. According to the superintendent, who did not participate directly in these negotiations, this was quite simple. But it is difficult to believe that teacher seniority and other union contract provisions, combined with the need to apportion equitably the I.T. teaching load among the three

schools and the need to offer courses that would benefit kids in each of the schools, did not create many of the problems the H.S. principal faced.

The financial benefits of the I.T. to the participating districts are attributable mainly to the fact that they jointly pay the teacher's salaries, which translates into lower per-pupil expenditures. If three districts combine to offer a course, they each pay only one-third of the teacher's salary. The districts also receive aid from the BOCES.

The benefit to the students is being able to take a wider variety of courses than they could otherwise. Suppose that the minimum class size is five, so that very small classes will be cancelled that term. Then judging by this year's enrollments, approximately 25-30 students have benefitted this year by being able to take a course they otherwise could not have. We can allow that some of those students would eventually be able to take the course if demand could be increased by offering it only in alternate years, and allow that some would be able to take the course independently. That still means about 20 students get to take courses they would not have been able to. That comes to six or seven per school. Of course most of them would find something else to take.

Additionally, one teacher-hour is saved for each receiving school that would have taught a course anyway, when that course is transmitted over the I.T. If five is the minimum class size, 8 teacher-hours have been saved or freed this way this year.

This is a sizeable benefit, but of course it is spread over three schools. Nor does it represent money actually saved, because the teachers are still full-time employees. Anyone whose class is freed can teach something else, either a new course or another section of a current course.

The costs to the district are several. Start-up costs include purchasing and installing the equipment, training the teachers and technicians, and administrative time spent coordinating schedules among the participating districts. Additionally, the initial unfamiliarity with the equipment led to frequent disruptions of classes by malfunctions. And since the program was quite unique, Yorkville was treated to a constant stream of visitors from other districts--even other states--and a variety of politicians who wanted to observe the I.T. in action, creating even more class disruptions. Much of the start-up costs were underwritten by the special grant from the New York State Legislature, and to the extent that these are one-time only costs, they must be prorated over the life of the program. Thus the costs to the district are less than it may at first appear.

The districts face continuing costs as well. They must maintain the equipment, and operate the daily shuttle service, and hold a series of conferences each summer to coordinate schedules between the districts. Because of the extra work involved in teaching a class on the I.T., the I.T. teachers are released from some of their non-teaching chores, so they must be replaced.

Yorkville has born a larger share of these costs than the other two districts have. Carson claims that, "Much of the administration of the I.T. project ends up in our lap." Also, the Yorkville AV person is responsible for maintenance of I.T. equipment at all three sites. Carson believes this is because Yorkville has more personnel to do it (and it does seem that Yorkville has a good deal of administrative capacity). "The attitude has been: 'Yorkville and Jones Forks and Jonesville are willing to share with each other.' I think that is the reason the project is working." Yorkville has also benefitted more from the project. Since they contribute more teachers than the other two districts they receive a bigger share of the BOCES money.

Conclusions

Yorkville appears to have overcome the unfortunate and divisive experiences surrounding the closing of two community school buildings. Some resentment may still remain, but the community and the school have in large part coalesced as partners once again. Yorkville compares favorably with other districts its size as concerns breadth of curriculum, activities, and standardized test scores, and parents seem generally pleased to have their children in this district.

We have attributed much of the credit for mending this relationship to the current Yorkville administration, especially Superintendent Reese. They are largely if not wholly perceived

as genuinely concerned about the children, and Reese has shown a willingness to innovate and to address the concerns of anyone who has something to say. But the willingness of the community to respond to their actions should not be ignored. Many of them felt very strongly that they had been deliberately deceived on a number of counts; most notably, they believed (i) that an explicit promise to always keep the smaller community schools open, a promise which was made to facilitate the consolidation and building project, had been broken, and (ii) that school officials promoting the school closings to the community had been less than candid about the factual issues on which the decision had been based. Whether the causes of the "misunderstandings" were deliberate or not, it is difficult to put away one's resentment, and one's distrust of public officials in general, and truly support and cooperate with the administration.

Conversely, then, we have attributed much of the blame for the fact that there was such divisiveness and resentment in the first place to the public stance of those persons who presented the case for closing the schools to the community. Perhaps it was not those persons' fault that misunderstandings occurred. But it remains true that large and vocal sectors of the community felt that they were considered unimportant and that their concerns were never even addressed.

As of 1986, though, Yorkville seems to have the worst behind it, and the best to come.

Notes

[1]When a budget is rejected the superintendent can declare austerity measures to keep costs down. He may eliminate all the "extras" the district normally provide. Students may have to walk up to a mile to a school bus, and interscholastic athletic competitions are cancelled. The latter especially works as a strong incentive to approve the budget.

[2]Carson gives examples of the kinds of problems involved, but the numbers he recites are not correct, nor were they intended to be. For example, he knows as well as anyone that the BOCES is more than five minutes from Yorkville.